As their health improves, British broaden quest for alternative health care

Caroline Richmond

David Henshaw, BHHSA (Assoc), Dip Hom, Dip Cert Biochem, MIPA, sounds like one of Britain's best qualified health care practitioners. However, before becoming too impressed, take a closer look at his diplomas.

Close inspection reveals that his biochemistry diploma was awarded by the International College of Natural Health Sciences and shows that he understands Dr. Wilhelm Schuessler's Biochemic Tissue Salts. He is also a member of the Independent Plato Academy, holds the diploma in homeopathy of the Galien [sic] College of Natural Healing and is an associate member of the British Holistic Health Sciences Association.

Henshaw, who also holds a bachelor's degree in history, has yet to unleash his therapeutic skills on the British public. He is a television producer and bought the diplomas to make a point in a program he was preparing about alternative therapies. They cost him £200; the qualifications in homeopathy, which cost £79, proved most expensive. The fee included the textbook, exam paper and a ballpoint pen, and he had to promise not to cheat while writing the exam.

Experiences like Henshaw's might be expected to make the British sceptical about alternative medicine and the practitioners who provide it, but that is not the case. Even though they are healthier and living longer than ever before, they are becoming obsessed with their health and are preoccupied with minor symptoms. They assuage this obsession by having a love affair with alternative medicine. On the other hand, the National Health Service (NHS), 40 years old and still getting a quart out of a pint pot, is often attacked for taking a nuts-and-bolts approach to illness.

The British establishment has always liked alternative medicine. The Queen has her homeopathic physician, while two former prime ministers, Lord Home and Margaret Thatcher, use acupuncture and meditation. Prince Charles, who served as president of the British Medical Association in 1983, berated doctors for ignoring the mystic side of alternative therapy.

England's Exeter University, which concentrates mainly on arts courses, now has a Centre for Complementary Health Studies. Its offers lectures on subjects such as Chinese herbalism and shamanism; the Queen's homeopathic doctor is a postgraduate student. It is starved for funds, a situation common to all British universities, and has recently

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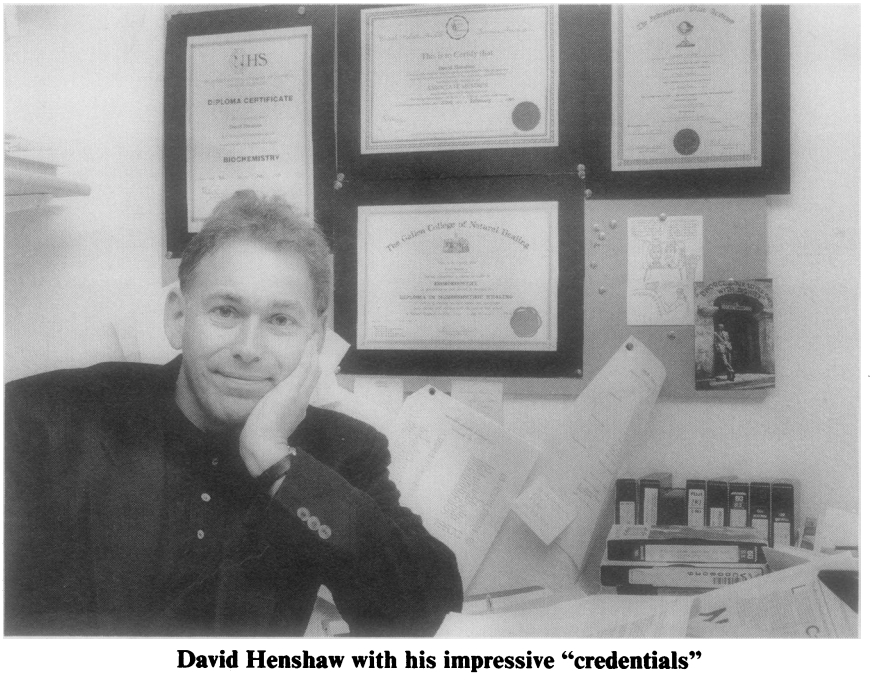

David Henshaw with his impressive "credentials"

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formed a financial link with the "health and diet centres" operated by a chain of health-food shops.

In 1986, 14% of Consumers' Association members had consulted an alternative therapist in the past year. The Exeter centre estimates that 15% of all health consultations outside hospitals take place with alternative therapists, a figure not out of line with Canadian estimates (One in five Canadians is using alternative therapies, survey finds. *Can Med Assoc J* 1991; 144: 469).

The Institute of Complementary Medicine estimates that 8 million alternative-type treatments are provided annually in the United Kingdom, with 75% of patients being referred for treatment by satisfied friends. In 1988 the Association of Community Health Councils, which covers England and Wales, estimated that the public spends between £150 million and £450 million on unorthodox treatments.

With such a large potential market, the number of practitioners has climbed markedly, from 29 000 in 1981 to 60 000 in 1988; only a tiny proportion of them are conventionally trained, although 70% of general practitioners say they would like to learn at least one alternative therapy.

Why is alternative medicine so attractive? A major reason is a sentimental belief that is skilfully marketed by therapists and the health-food trade — that alternative medicine is natural, and that nature is always kind and gentle. Demand is fuelled by unrealistic expectations that have arisen because of advances made by scientific medicine. There is also the thrill of the unorthodox — we must obey the law, but can still thumb our noses at the doctors.

Another selling point is the considerable element of consumer choice found in alternative health care, an element so often rare or absent in conventional medicine. Most important of all are the much longer consultation times alternative practitioners provide.

Also important, as Professor David Goldberg of Manchester University's Department of Psychiatry noted, is the discomfort many general practitioners feel when consulted about psychologic symptoms, and this reinforces people's natural tendency to somatize their problems.

In 1988 *Horizon*, a television program, examined alternative medicine from an anthropologic viewpoint and concluded that, above all, it offers physical treatments for psychiatric problems. This was confirmed by a 1989 paper in the *British Homeopathic Journal*, which showed that a homeopath's patients were more likely to have psychiatric disorders than a GP's patients.

David Cantor, PhD, a psychologist at Surrey University in Guildford, England, points out that although each system of alternative medicine is philosophically complete in itself — homeopathy is logically incompatible with herbalism, for instance — adherents usually believe in the lot, selecting a "pick'n'mix" package that includes visits to their family doctor.

The term "unorthodox" is unfair to some therapists. For instance, the voluntarily registered osteopaths and chiropractors have undergone 4 years' training and passed an examination. However, they have no legal status and anyone can call himself an osteopath or chiropractor and set up in practice without a day's training — with impunity.

Most people agree that alternative practitioners should be reg-

istered, but with whom? And what therapies should qualify? Where does one draw the line between, say, homeopathy and reflexology? Both are based on beliefs that are at odds with the known laws of nature, but one is a respectable system of medicine, historically sanctioned and available through the NHS, and the other is on the very distant fringe.

And who will make recommendations to the government — the Institute of Complementary Medicine, the Council for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, or the National Consultative Council for Alternative and Complementary Medicine? The existence of three different organizations suggests that either the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing, or else it thinks it's doing it wrong.

Alternative therapists and the products they "prescribe" — mainly herbal substances or dietary supplements — have grown like topsy and are not subject to the type of legislation that controls the medical profession and pharmaceutical industry.

Magazines dealing with alternative health accuse doctors of handing out prescriptions by the handful, and yet extol the benefits of vitamins and minerals. The reason is all too clear. As journalist Duncan Campbell showed recently, many alternative practitioners are registered with manufacturers and get substantial kickbacks on their patients' mail-order prescriptions. Practitioners often prescribe up to 10 supplements, including such dubious products as hypoglycemia formula and chelation formula.

In Britain, one man in four and one woman in three takes supplements of some type. In 1989 Britons spent £250 million on vitamins, minerals and food supplements and £100 million on natural remedies such as ginseng and garlic; sales have doubled in the last 5 years and are expected to exceed £750 million by 2000.

Manufacturers of supplements and herbal products, although forbidden by law from making therapeutic claims in the absence of a product licence, have increasingly flouted the law, either by encouraging journalists and retailers to make claims for them, or by giving their products names like "PMS formulation" or "Boost IQ."

There have also been scandals about harmful supplements such as germanium, niacin and tryptophan; these supplements have since been withdrawn. Unfortunately, the alternative-medicine trade is still selling potentially harmful substances, including chromium and boron.■